A MIX BEYOND TIME: E-LEARNING AND SOCRATE'S MAIEUTICS

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Abstract: The transition from direct learning to distance education modifies the roles of all actors involved in this process. Moreover, new characters appear on stage, among which one should count the tutor or the trainer at distance, the manager and the responsible person for the platform of the distance learning program. This article aims at developing a parallel between the mission of the teacher from the traditional education and that of the tutor working in distance training, emphasizing the return to one of the oldest methodological techniques, namely Socrate's maieutics.
Keywords: E-learning, maieutics, tutor, teacher, interdisciplinarity

The technological revolution of the '80s, as well as the electronic one of the '90s have transformed the economical, social and implicitly the educational world. In the present context, education has to diversify its ways of interaction, as it has proved to be preserving cumbersome and inefficient institutions, unsuitable to a continuously changing society. By default, the methods used in sciences of education must diversify and adapt to the information avalanche we have been facing in the recent decades. The approach of the strictly defined disciplines using only the traditional teaching support is limiting and boring. Through interdisciplinary, occurred assimilations of other methods from the sciences pedagogy is interacting with and these methods have found relevant solutions to the different problems of education.

It is a fact that pupils and students nowadays are different from those of previous generations. Most of them, especially the pupils and students from urban areas, are already routinely using the Internet and email, text messages or social networks such as Yahoo, Facebook or Twiter. This mode of communication resonates perfectly with their style of learning. Even if the teacher uses or not in classroom/ seminary **the information and communication technology (ICT),** pupils or students home will certainly use at home modern means of information as support for homework.

Due to the emergence of new technologies that can be used successfully in the educational space, the traditional system's status occupies another position, allowing to emerge new systems of learning (Distance Learning, Online Learning, Hybrid Learning Type (Blended Learning), E-learning, M-learning); these new systems of learning facilitate the learning process for

students. **One of the indisputable advantages of this type of learning consists of: the removal of space and time constraints,** uniting groups of students from different cultures and meridians.

The learning process assisted by technical means already has a history comprehending four major stages, the last one being the electronic computer. Having as basic tool the computer, such type of training is based on an educational product to be transposed in a computer program (software product). In order to implement this type of education in schools with traditional education, are to be outlined four major directions:

1. teaching computer science with all its branches;
2. the pedagogical programming of the content;
3. development of the computer-program;
4. sector targeting hardware programs.

It is essential for the program to mobilize primarily teachers in terms of the computer science matter, but it must also involve training for programmers on subjects or groups of subjects as well as the training of some well-prepared psychologists in this field.

A significantly important step would consist of the gradually equipping of schools at all levels with the necessary training resources by placing computers in the teaching technology and by establishing some pilot centres for the computer assisted learning.

In this context of the educational changes, not only the teacher's role is changing, but there are emerging new categories of educators, such as tutors, who undertake part or all of the activities the teacher possesses in the learning process. The tutor appears like a necessity in the electronic technology-based learning, providing the interface between the institution and students. He is considered animator of the collective intelligence within a group of students and gives guidance in the learning process (Levy, 1999: 3). A tutor who intends to work in the area of E-learning must understand the nature and philosophy of this type of education (Queiroz, 2003), which is not fundamentally different from the traditional learning, it just uses "access keys" totally different.

In the E-learning process, the following categories of actors are involved (Goga, 2012, p 21.)

- The tutor - a person who "manages the course, leads students in the learning process, motivates them, interact with them and evaluates their work" (Higgison, 2001). The tutor must be able to lead the entire ongoing learning process;
- The students - those around which learning is achieved, being mainly adults (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Many of the students enter the learning process with an extensive professional experience that can be valued.

- The designer - specialized person in designing the learning content online. He has the necessary information, skills and attitudes required to the design the content (Cheong et al, 2006);
- Technical support - the group providing the technical part of the entire learning system, without which learning can not take place in the E-learning environment. This group is specialized in hardware troubleshooting, support for technical problems (Stephenson, 2000);
- The management of the institution that is committed to understanding the whole E-learning process and to the support of this process by providing technical infrastructure elements, development of relevant policies and procedures to facilitate learning in the E-learning process.

The implementation of new technologies leads to the extinction of repetitive tasks in favour for those that require adaptability, initiative and autonomy. Worldwide, in most activity fields, the organizational tendency is centred on small, autonomous teams, that require the ability to work in teams. As a corollary, a good grasp of the media is essential, both at micro and macro level, including all units subsumed into a global network. Finally, the flexibility, adaptability, teamwork are key points in employers' requirements; graduates are demanded a high level of competitiveness in the context of a rather unstable job market. This is the motive for which pupils, students and those that are already active as employees have to learn new skills, must adapt to new technologies and, ultimately, have to be able to promote their experience and expertise.

Evolution of the Teaching and Learning binomial

Reflections on learning are met in the common knowledge, in concepts, beliefs and popular opinions about learning, forming what epistemology calls implicit theories of learning. Thus, the idea that learning occurs through reward and punishment is the most popular and traditional view on learning. Another implicit theory about learning is that it is in a process of knowledge accumulation, teaching being the filling of the human mind with different information (Lindgren, 1967, pp.211 - 243).

Socrates, through his method of discussion (maieutics) "suggests that ideas are already in the fruitful mind of the subject, but they need to be helped to be born in order to eventually manifest themselves" (Blackburn, 1999, p.253). This "giving of birth" (maieutikos) to ideas consists of asking heuristic questions to the student so as he, by answering them, to succeed discovering that he actually knows the problem called into question. Plato, with his conception on knowledge, talks about the issue of differences between people in terms of learning potential. Aristotle, interested in psychology, thinking and language, predicts the laws of association (contiguity, similarity and contrast). The Socratic method aims at discovering the truth by means of the equation:

question and answer, supported by a thinking activity shared both by teacher and pupil. By his method that he calls "maieutics", meaning "the art of helping the birth of the truth", Socrates sought to make the other party aware of truths unaware of possessing (Stere, 1998, p. 76). The question represents the beginning of knowledge and progress in knowledge.

The ultimate goal was to reach definitive knowledge, but the technique itself was revealing and an indisputable source of knowledge. For Socrates, man is placed in the central question, not nature or cosmos, and the way to knowledge coincides with the way of getting to know the self. The Socratic dialogue involved a communication based on contact and fertilization of knowledge, streamlining the barrier between teacher and pupil. The key was held by the teacher, who through the mastery of asking questions, raised the interest and avoided responses based on the mechanical reproduction of sentences. The appearance of a question does not necessarily imply ignorance. Rather, the problem that is discussed often predetermines the solution that has to be revealed. Often, the answer is forthcoming in the very question that is asked. One must take into account the fact that especially in a traditional lesson, the superficial and abusive use of conversation is of great danger. In the labyrinth of questions, the lesson may lose its purpose and systematic nature, and most of the students will not make any effort of thought.

In a formal lesson, in classroom/ seminary, during the dialogue sequences, those involved in developing the answers "in choir" are few, always the same, thus the minimum efficiency of these sequences of acquisition of new knowledge. This knowledge is harmful because it gives the impression that the whole class is working, when in fact most of the students do nothing. In E-learning, as the approach is individual, the disciples cannot hide behind one another; they are encouraged to give their own judgments. Each of the members of the education binomial: teacher - student participates as issuer and receiver, their roles being complementary. The teacher is the one who usually sets questions suggesting new cognitive experiences and challenging judgments on the issue discussed. Often, he is the one that imposes the direction of resolution, through directives and limited questions, appreciates the value of the solutions and formulates the conclusion. There are situations when students demonstrate initiative, ask questions, analyze, interpret, explain and formulate judgments, propose solutions and assess everything in their own way.

The modern methods recommended for use in educational interaction, according the standard interpretation provided by I.O. Pânişoară (2001, pp. 103-144) are:
1. Method of brainstorming;
2. The electronic method of brainstorming;
3. Personal brainstorming;
4. Phillips 66 Meeting;

5. Creative controversy;
6. Focus group technique;
7. Interactive listening;
8. "Aquarium" technique (fishbowl);
9. Method of creative problem solving (problem solving).

Most of these methods have as much as didactical support techniques much older, maieutics being undisputable one of them.

Once outdated the ideas according to which the lack of physical presence "dehumanizes" the teacher-disciple relation, it can be fully harness the ease of communication and the lack of environmental constraints that a traditionalist environment involves. A tutor can support very well, even remotely, the scaffolding of the teacher-student relation, with all the moral implications this entails.

The traditional teacher promotes basic moral values and assists students in acquiring these values, by emphasizing the significance of feelings: satisfaction of success, cooperation and respect for the work well done, for the task carried through. The German teacher Herbart underlined that the role of educator of the teacher is based on its potential to awaken "virtues", to form characters.

As *partner in education*, the teacher interacts with other educational factors, especially with parents, the teachers and the disciples forming together a community. We recall here the delineation of the class as "social system which meets at least three groups of people (teachers, students, parents), each requiring from its members certain forms of behaviour" (Gherghinescu, 1999). Moreover, as *member of the teaching staff*, the teacher is in close interdependence with colleagues, principals, and other educational factors.

In E-learning, the social group is unconditioned geographically; its members may come from totally different backgrounds and cultures, which is a great advantage in broadening the cultural universe of participants in the educational process.

Finally, the crucial role of the trainer is the same with the one of the teacher, both quantifying the results of the work and seeing their own aspirations fulfilled through the activity and results of their disciple.

The learning experience is an action that should be based on the Confucian axiom "do and understand", passed in education by J.Dewey as "learning by doing". Active and conscious participation in the educational act - functions of individual conscience must be triggered in both agents. The essential functions of individual consciousness (according V. Oprescu, 1983) cause selective reporting of the human subject to the demands of society, influencing significantly the capacity of adaptation of each man - educated or who is educating.

Most psychologists concerned about the school, believe that while teaching, the teacher must:

- communicate certain information according curricula;
- connect students' learning to assimilate this information, as well as to develop capacities and competences in accordance with certain pedagogical objectives.
- In this context, the teacher guides the students, helps, evaluates and encourages them;
- draw conclusions and generalizations about the topics taught;
- encourage students' participation in the learning - educational activity and require certain performance standards;
- stimulate individual and group creativity.

Therefore, teaching represents a complex and dynamic that teachers should fully possess and continually improve.

Due to the different views of which learning has been researched, the definitions of the concept of learning are numerous. Thus, the Russian psychologist A.N. Leontiev (1903-1979) defines learning as "the process of acquisition of the individual experience of behaviour." For Leontiev, the essential element of human learning is the assimilation of the species' experience, of the socio-cultural experience of humanity. Moreover, learning does not determine only a change of behaviour, but also contributes to the development of the human capacity in order to create, to evaluate and to self-form. It is obvious that long before this modern approach, Leontiev's theory anticipates change.

For A. Claus (Claus, 1967), learning is "a change in behaviour, achieved by solving a problem that puts the individual in relation to the environment"; for the psychologist Robert Gagne learning is "the change in mood or human capacity that can be maintained and that cannot be attributed to growth process" (Gagne, 1975, p 11). Gagne points out that the change called learning is manifested as a change in behaviour, and its production is derived from the comparison of the behaviour the individual was capable of before being placed in a learning situation with behaviour that gives proofs where applied this treatment.

David Ausubel believes that the most important factor influencing learning is the cognitive structure, i.e. the "existing knowledge consisting of facts, concepts, propositions, theories and raw perceptual data, the learner can dispose of at all times "(Ausubel, Robinson, 1981, p 76).

In order to meet the different requirements and make his behaviour offer based on different applications, **the teacher should be aware of his mission**, he is obliged to notice and assess; it is necessary to build the willingness to receive suggestions, the ability to organize and direct the training process.

The teacher has to understand the essentiality of his profession as to contribute to the evolution of the society; "Classroom is not so much a place as a ritual to treat a subject of the academic curriculum. In the classroom, one learns more than a subject, one learns a lesson of life." (Gherghinescu, 1999, p.11).

Teaching in the cyberspace requires a change in the paradigm, so if the traditional teaching model focuses on teacher trying to transfer knowledge to his students, in the new approach, teaching is centred on the relation between teacher/ student and student/ knowledge. In E-learning, student is in the centre of the learning process. The paradigm that can meet the need of integration of the student placed in the centre of the learning process is the one of the learning focused on the student. E-learning also responds to the need for continuing education of adults and therefore lifelong learning paradigm acquires new meanings in this context of learning.

Not only the educational process requires changes, adjustments, but also the teacher's role acquires new dimensions, changing from that of a "guide to every step" in the "guide to need" (Stephenson, 2002). The teacher becomes the designer and the manager of the learning process where students construct their own knowledge networks (Stephenson, 2002).

Considering that the new classification (that of tutor) is relatively new, their training was originally developed through a modernization of the profession of teacher, to which new skills and abilities were added. The main roles of the tutor are: Learning Facilitator, Expert, Instructor, Designer, Coach, Assessor, Mentor, Advisor, Manager, Moderator, and Technician.

Most authors in the field support the classification based on tutor's functions: educational, psychosocial, and organizational (managerial), (Mason, 1992, Paulsen 1995, Berge, 1996, Garrison & Anderson, 2003, Wilson & Stancey, 2004). Berge (1995) and Wilson & Stancey (2004) identified an additional function of the tutor, namely the technical function. It is essential to note that the "job" of the tutor implies cumulative skills. The pedagogical function of the tutor is one that develops around the facilitation of learning. The psychosocial function consists of promoting a friendly social environment, essential to online learning. The managerial function involves organizing rules in organizing the tutor's agenda, the organization of teaching system and learning targets, as well as decision making within the process of facilitation, and also in the communication with the institution. The technical function depends on the tutor, this being forced to familiarize himself first with the new technology; after that, the tutor will be able to transfer the knowledge to students.

Tutors in E-learning come with a baggage of knowledge already formed in the traditional system. The E-learning environment involves the use of already acquired new skills but also the training of skills specific to this learning system. To define the E-learning skills that a tutor must possess, many researchers (Salmon, 2000; Brigitte et al, 2004; Virgil & Varvel, 2007) as well as the authors of the standards for the tutor profession start from the classification of the four functions of the tutor, developed earlier, namely: pedagogical, social, managerial and technical. Another classification of the skills is achieved by Theodore C. Smith (Smith, 2005), starting from the idea

that in order to achieve a course, are needed preparation, proper conduct and end time period for this course. For all these stages, the tutor must possess specific skills.

Pressures from the society under permanent changing, of the technologies constantly emerging used in the E-learning system and the preferences of students to participate in online programs, lead to a need to change the attitude of teachers on the full involvement in the electronic learning environment. Such a change of attitude involves engaging E-learning educators in professional development programs. Professionalization is a process that begins in the initial phase of training and continues throughout the teaching experience, the teacher always adapting to new methods, technologies and learning systems. Thus, the initial and continuing training for E-learning educators in an organized and well-defined context, is a viable solution that leads to professional, academic tutoring, not under voluntary conditions as we see it happens today in many universities in Romania. The sporadic initiatives on the training of teachers from the university level are welcome and considered an important step in connecting the learning system focused on student, paradigm underlying the E-learning system; nonetheless, this strategy does not satisfy the need for training tutors, who are the directly involved in the learning process.

In order to describe the entire E-learning system, Leclercq (2000) uses the metaphor of the diamond, which has 16 facets: 1) The one who is being taught (student / pupil / student), 2) What is being learn (content) 3) The one who teaches (trainer) 4) With whom it is being learned (peers), 5) According to which principles (pedagogical, philosophical, psychological, sociological) 6) How it is being taught (methods: strategies, activities, paradigms) 7) What it is being taught (resources); 8) According to which organization (locations, times, progress); 9) Where is one heading to (Objectives); 10) What are we relying on (Requirements); 11) From what one starts (prior knowledge); 12) How and when one measures results (evaluation) 13) What expectations are being met (analysis of needs); 14) What constraints are being faced (conditions favouring or disfavouring learning) 15) What impact is noticed; 16) At the request of whom (within a contract or agreement) (Denis, 2003, pp. 19-46).

The pedagogical and relational skills of the tutor are the same that are required for trainers and teachers. For this reason, the experience acquired in the adults' learning activity is a considerable asset for those who want to become tutors at distance. The contact with the student defines the role of the tutor in order to facilitate learning (Bossuet, 1982, Denis, 1990).

Nonetheless, interventions at distance have requirements different from those in face to face interventions, both for the pace of intervention (interventions of students are monitored almost daily by e-mail), as well as the communication tools they need. This is why, for example, in addition to the ability to lead and manage groups of students, the tutor should provide guidance

through chats and forums, giving tips that can be structured in a communication guideline.

The tutor presents himself as a privileged interlocutor of the learners. His roles are changing depending on the epistemological options of the pursued training device, but also according to the authors that approach the topic.

Some of these roles seem to be the object of a global consensus according to which the tutor at distance acts as a facilitator and a mediator, « *Le tuteur doit savoir accompagner, écouter, conseiller; prévoir les difficultés à venir; penser par rapport aux objectifs et non en fonction du temps passé; mutualiser les apports respectifs (...)* » (Jacquinot, 1999).

The basic profile of the tutor serves in whole or primarily as a "reference point" (not as an expression of the rule). Regardless the field of activity, the practical size is essential, based on this one being shaped the tutor's profile.

The teacher should feel free to answer ***critically*** yet ***creatively*** to the new technologies and under no circumstances is the teacher supposed to ignore this aspect if he wants to communicate with pupils, or students. The trilogy of teaching-learning-assessment can be combined with the traditional teaching methods involving information and communication technology, their percentage being variable depending on the trend started by the teacher/ trainer.

In the traditional cognitive psychology, ***knowledge*** is seen as a kind of conditional processing of meta-cognitive strategies used in scheduling the student's mind. In an entirely different way, the socio-cultural tradition of vigotskian-type, ***knowledge*** is understood in terms of *learning to use of the cultural tools*. Since these tools are always specific to particular social and historical contexts, it is difficult to draw learning models that are generally valid, except for the few cultural tools that are going beyond several different contexts.

Surpassing the digital era, the knowledge paradigm must be one of **dialogue**; education must go beyond the specific cultural tools, but without being limited to the abstraction provided by the cognitive psychology.

The development of education in the direction of **dialogue** can only be the result of a teaching-learning-assessment way at a conceptualized level higher than the previously one. Because **dialogue** requires opening, widening of the horizon and depth, this way of learning is both an individual direction for pupil/ student and a social one for school as a whole. **Free creative thinking** can be promoted by the removal of constraining factors and encouraging the exchange of perspectives between trainers and pupils, students respectively.

Learning is not only a way of acquiring knowledge but also a modality of growth, enrichment, evolution.

Thus, the E-learning perspective is nothing but a way of enriching the cultural universe of the pupil/ student, without for the foundation of learning to be affected. As in any revolutionary movement, the implementation of the all

that is new meets difficulties, most of which being valid. Some teachers proponents of the classical education are reluctant to change, considering that *certain mental skills associated with modern technologies would not be of much help in the learning process*, especially when pupils/ students indiscriminately take information from the Internet, favoring automatism and superficiality. Other difficulties arise from the **lack of information with practical connotations** regarding ICT or **a guide that informs teachers how to reach it.**

Also, an exclusive E-learning approach can lead to the following risks:
- The person may feel relieved of the responsibility of participation;
- Space-familiarity, personalized space for each subject may induce a sense of apartness given that it is not being shared a common space, personalized based on the interactions with individuals. So the familiarity of space can inhibit the activity and the feelings of belonging to the group;
- The lack of "face to face" interaction results in alienation.

The advantages of a mixed (blended) use in the educational institutions or even the advantages of an exclusive use (in the continuous training of adults) are far more numerous.

Combining traditional teaching methods with E-learning methods represents a change of paradigm with implications for knowledge in the society in general and for learning in particular, facilitating the integration of graduates in a form of education using new methods in the labour market.

Experience and variety of tradition, combined with the facilities the modern technology offers represents a solid support in preparing all types of learners.

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